Chapter 4
Windscrest

The Storm of Magic is known by many names, each one significantly more vibrant and creative than the blandly descriptive monicker we evidently insist on imposing upon it.

To the mountain folk, it is "Dal an-Rakhn", literally "The hand of chaos".

The people of Faegrian highlight its permanence with the moniker "Kryn-Marre", "Unblinking Eye".

In the Phlegian Swamps, it is simply "The Maw."

Even the Ignans, distanced from the Storm by thousands of miles, have a name for its fury - "Ravv Ainox", or literally "The Starving Caldera".

Some name it for its ferocity, others its destructive power.

A few highlight its corruptive, transformative influence.

Most assign it a sort of wilful malevolence or sentience, describing it as part or all of a living entity.

In all cases, it is referred to with a great deal of reverence and an unhealthy amount of fear.

But despite the fearful implications of these ominous titles, the storm is actually very simple, and its behavior is quite predictable.

The storm is roughly hexagonal, with each sector handily dominated by the raw, untempered form of a single elemental magic. It does not move or rotate, and barring some minor seasonal variation, the boundaries do not drift.
The long-standing influence of each element has irrevocably reshaped the surrounding area, with the influence strengthening exponentially as one approaches the center of the storm.
The fire sector resembles a wind-blasted desert where the clouds rain nothing but embers and ash. The closer one approaches the center, the more volatile and volcanic the ground becomes.
The water sector, meanwhile, is battered by endless torrential rainfall, and any underlying stone has long since eroded into an immensely deep and treacherous lake.
The life sector is an impossibly overgrown swampy mass of plant and animal life, trapped in a grotesque cycle of endless transformation.
The wind sector is blasted by continuous high winds, eroding the stone into a blinding mass of dust and sand.
The stone sector is deceptively calm, but the terrain is constantly shifting and flowing, roiling in on itself like a very slow boil. The earth is hungry there.
And the lightning sector is constantly illuminated by hundreds of strikes, arcing from the clouds to the ground and back. The ground is scorched and scarred, and the strikes are unpredictable.
Each sector is uniquely treacherous, but the dangers are known and have been comprehensively documented.
The storm, in and of itself, is well understood.
But there are a number of questions that yet remain.

Two uncertainties dominate the discussion of the storm:

How and when did it come to exist?

And what lies at its center?

We know the storm has existed for longer than humanity has lived on the surface, but it is as yet uncertain if it predates the fall of the cities of the Ancients.

Knowing this could potentially help us understand how it began, and what role it played in the collapse of their civilization.

But nobody has ever traveled far enough into the Storm to determine the answer to either question.

Expeditions into the Storm are invariably stymied, both by the extreme danger of the physical environment, the unique and unpredictable wildlife, and the intensely high levels of raw elemental energy.

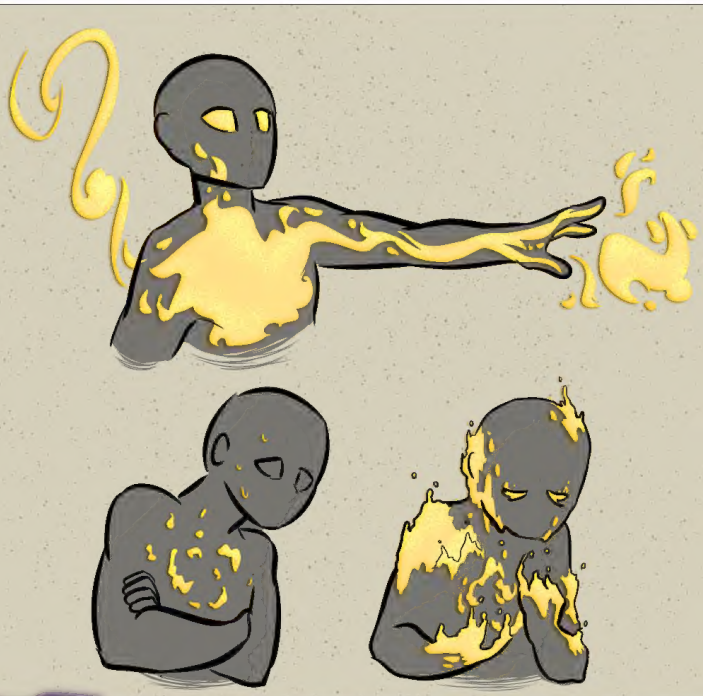
Most hazardously, exposure to this intensely energy-rich environment gradually induces what is commonly known as "elemental corruption."

This condition is most commonly found in amateur mages incapable of fully purging the last traces of elemental energy from their souls after casting.

The malingering essence, festering uncontrolled within the soul, induces an imbalance in the body's elemental makeup, resulting in gradual physical and mental deterioration.

If not treated quickly, the condition can become chronic and induce lifelong complications.

In an environment as intense as the Storm, the corruption can reach a lethal level within hours.



The energies are so intense as to gradually infiltrate any being, no matter how protected. Thus, elemental corruption can afflict even the hardiest, most magically inert soul.

This danger can only be avoided by regularly purging one's soul of all six elemental influences, in the same way a practiced mage purges themself of remaining trace energies after casting.

But this task is not as simple as it may initially sound.

The most extreme consequences are faced by magically inert individuals, as they are powerless to impel the energies in any way, but even a mage finds themself restricted to commanding only those energy they can naturally control. What elements they CANNOT control will continue to corrupt them.

(A fire mage, no matter how skilled, will still be corrupted by the insidious influences of life, water, stone, lightning and wind.)

Because of the inevitability of widespread elemental corruption, expeditionary efforts into the storm unilaterally stall out within twenty miles of the edge, when explorers are forced to turn back to avoid permanent damage - or, worse are lost forever in the wastes.

The edges have been mapped, but despite centuries of valiant efforts, nobody has ever seen what lies at the center of the storm.

Of course, this is because I've never tried.

The solution to the Storm is insultingly simple on paper, but in execution is rather more involved.
The simple fact of the matter is that only someone capable of controlling all six elements can survive the toxic environment of The Storm long enough to reach the center - and that, for such a person, this hitherto impossible task would, in fact, be trivial.
The difficulty lies in acquiring such a person.
These talents are rare indeed, appearing once every few centuries at most - and in fact, the academy had not seen an Elemental Magus in over a hundred years at the time of my enrollment.
Fortunately for the Academy, my phenomenal natural talent ~~is at their disposal for this~~.
Hm.
They didn't like it when I used "phenomenal natural talent" last time.
Fortunately for the Academy, I am just as eager to discover what lies at the center of the Storm as anyone in the research division -
And as I am the Elemental Magus, I am capable of accomplishing this grand endeavor with minimal risk.
Having selected my point of entry, I will document my findings as I venture into the heart of the Storm.
KRACKLE

Electing to enter through the Lightning sector ed myself from the errant strikes wi
a simple shield. Since the primary property s to be drawn to or repelled from itself
this would repel half the strikes and ha bsorb the other half, leaving me free to
avigate the storm, my only concern now the sound of thunder crashing all around me. As
I made progress into the storm, I charge with lightning energy and inscribed it wit
the simple commands necessary to sus ould maintain it without my constant

You've talked to people before, right?
Yeah, like, ten years ago. I'm kind of out of practice.
That's better than NO experience.
You're literally the only person I've ever actually talked to.
Yeah, but you have centuries of Vash's experience to draw on!
It was easier for Vash!
People respect gods! I'm just... some guy.
Well.
ONE of us has to go first.
Yeah.

So you know this place?
Windscrest. They're an independent town, but Vash put them under his protection so the other cities would stop trying to claim them.
They've had a friendly trade relationship for several centuries now.
Do they have a market? We might want to pick up some supplies.
Uh - yeah, they've got a market. They mostly export gems and pigment, though.
This road cuts straight through town before turning more northward, towards the closest major opening into the caves.
They sure seem to like windmills a lot.
What do they do when the wind stops?
The wind never stops.
It comes off the near edge of the Standing Storm.
HWOOOO
See, you can see the cloud wall on the horizon.
Oh, huh!
Well, this place seems nice.
Mm.
And it shouldn't be too hard to, you know, talk to a couple shopkeeps.
It's kind of their JOB to talk to people, right?
It is.
So it shouldn't matter if we're a little rusty!
...Yeah. They get plenty of travelers.
Probably won't even notice us.

It's them! The travelers from Vash!
Don't you come any closer!
Where are your beasts?
Get away from us!
We won't let you take us too!
STOP!
Everybody stop!

Are you kidding?
Long, BLACK hair! I was very specific!
Not yellow, not pink!
And do you see an army of chimeras anywhere?!
So, these... AREN'T the ones with the chimeras?
No!
If I had to guess, I'd say these are SURVIVORS of Vash!
Right?
Uh... yes.
Great work, guys.
Attacking terrified refugees.
GREAT look for us.
Uhh... we're really sorry about the mix-up.
Welcome to Windscrest?

I'm really sorry about them. They've been jumpy since we first lost contact with Vash.
When they first sent me to scout out what was going on, that black-haired woman sent a flying chimera after me. Barely outflew it.
When we learned the city was full-on destroyed, they got even more scared.
My uncle saw you two on the road out from Vash a few days ago, and warned us we'd have company.
Guess the welcoming committee assumed you were the ones who'd attacked me.
I'd have gotten there sooner, but flying's not easy for me right now.
The doctor's not gonna be happy I left at all...
Well, um... thanks for stepping in.
That could've gotten ugly.
Don't worry about it.
Everyone's on edge after what happened to Vash.
Speaking of which...
CREEP
The magistrate was hoping to talk to you about that.

He's just up the stairs.
And be nice, he's scared too.
Oh... oh great.
GREAT.
It's okay. We'll sort this out.
The travelers from Vash?
Yup. Blond man, pink elf. That's them.
Right this way.
Um... you shouldn't bring the sword in.
We can hold it for you-
It's all I have left.
...Oh.
Uh, that's...
You can keep it.
Thank you.
KNOCK KNOCK
Enter.

Magistrate Luran?
I've brought the travelers from Vash.
Of course!
Welcome!
I'm so sorry about the commotion.
How was your journey? Not too bad?
Don't worry about it.
No, it was uneventful.
That's good. In that case, I'll get straight to the point.
Our scout reported that Vash was completely destroyed.
The sudden destruction of our communication lacrima corroborates his account.
How did this happen?
I know this subject must be difficult.
Please, take your time.

That's... harrowing, to say the least.
This... woman, this collector of souls. Do you think she'll come here? Are we in danger?
I don't think so.
Windcrest doesn't have a god. She shouldn't have any reason to come here.
Oh, that's good.
Ah, but we're not done.
Please, tell me about yourselves. How did you escape the destruction?
Oh, I mean...
What's there to tell?
Maintaining the safety of my town is paramount.
I must be sure of your intentions before I allow you through.

Our intentions?

But we... we didn't want to stop here! We're just passing through!

Young lady, please consider how this looks to me.

A vast, powerful city is completely leveled in a matter of moments.

In the face of this impossibly potent magic,

its notoriously competent god is apparently powerless to protect it.

And now, two strangers who escaped the destruction completely unscathed have come to my town for reasons unknown.

Strangers who, given their familiarity with the sequence of events, apparently witnessed the city's destruction firsthand, yet somehow survived.

I do not want to make unfortunate assumptions, so instead I ask -

How did you escape the destruction?

...I didn't see it firsthand.

I wasn't living in the city when it was destroyed. I was out in the woods.

I only went to investigate when I felt the ground shaking.

Living alone?

Yes.

Godless?

...Yes.

But I wasn't exiled. I grew up in a small town, like this one.

I'm not a criminal.

I see you're a mage.
Academy trained?
Uh... no.
Self-taught.
Your tattoo appears to be a Life rune.
Dangerous branch of magic to be "self-taught" in.
I grew up in a very rural area.
The Academy wasn't an option for me.
...I just heal and grow plants, nothing too special.
Mm.
And you, young man?
It's, uh....
It's hard to explain.
Does it have anything to do with the fact that you are currently in possession of Vash's sword?

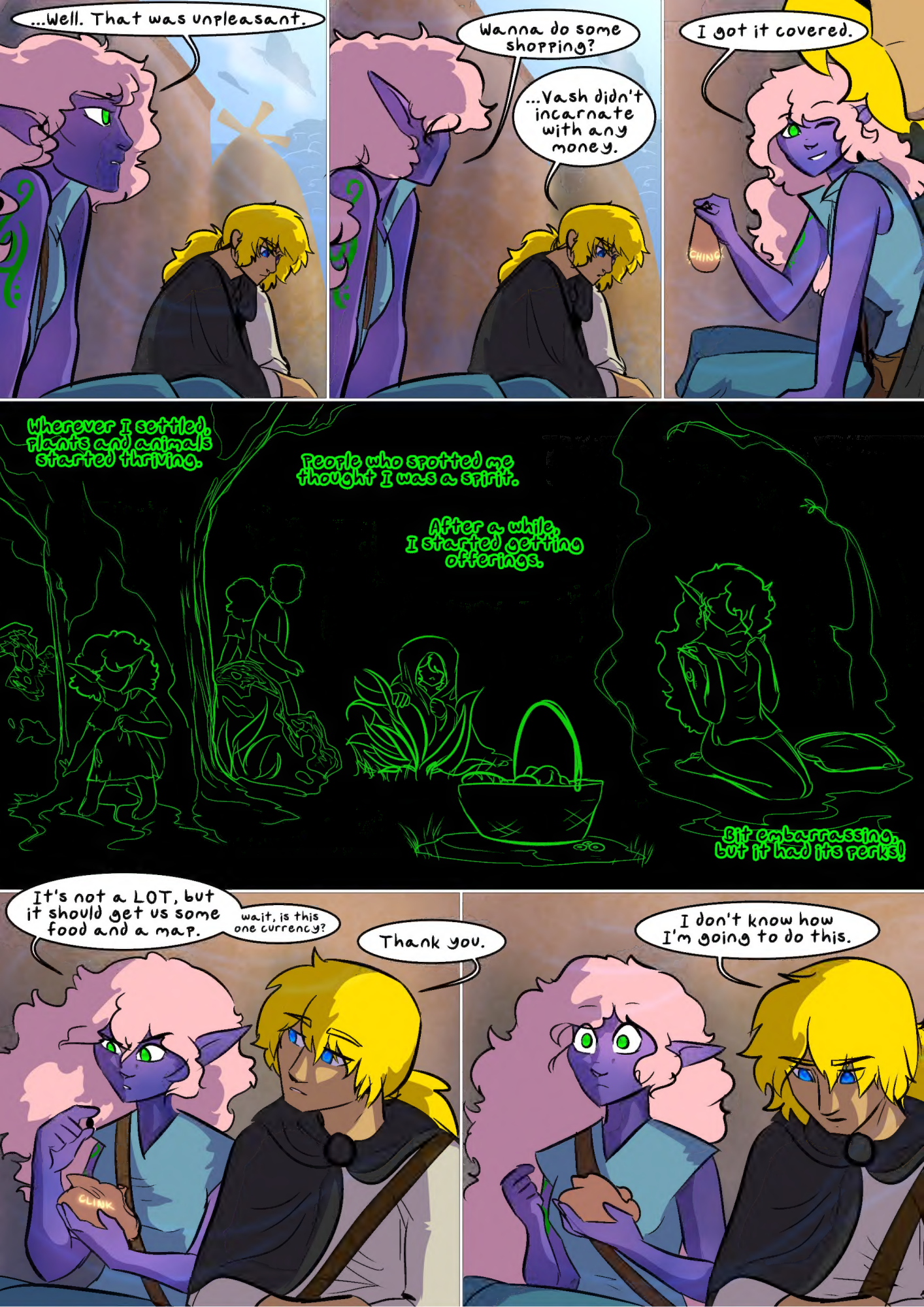
...Yes.
It's also why I look like him.
I survived the destruction because I didn't exist when the city was destroyed.
After the Collector took Vash's soul, I woke up in his body a few hours later.
Kendal-!
I only survived because Alinva found and healed me.
I'm... not sure I understand.
You... were Vash?
No. But this was his incarnation.
I'm... not him, but we are connected.
He directed me to pursue the Collector and retrieve him.
I told you it was hard to explain.
I was hoping it wouldn't come up.

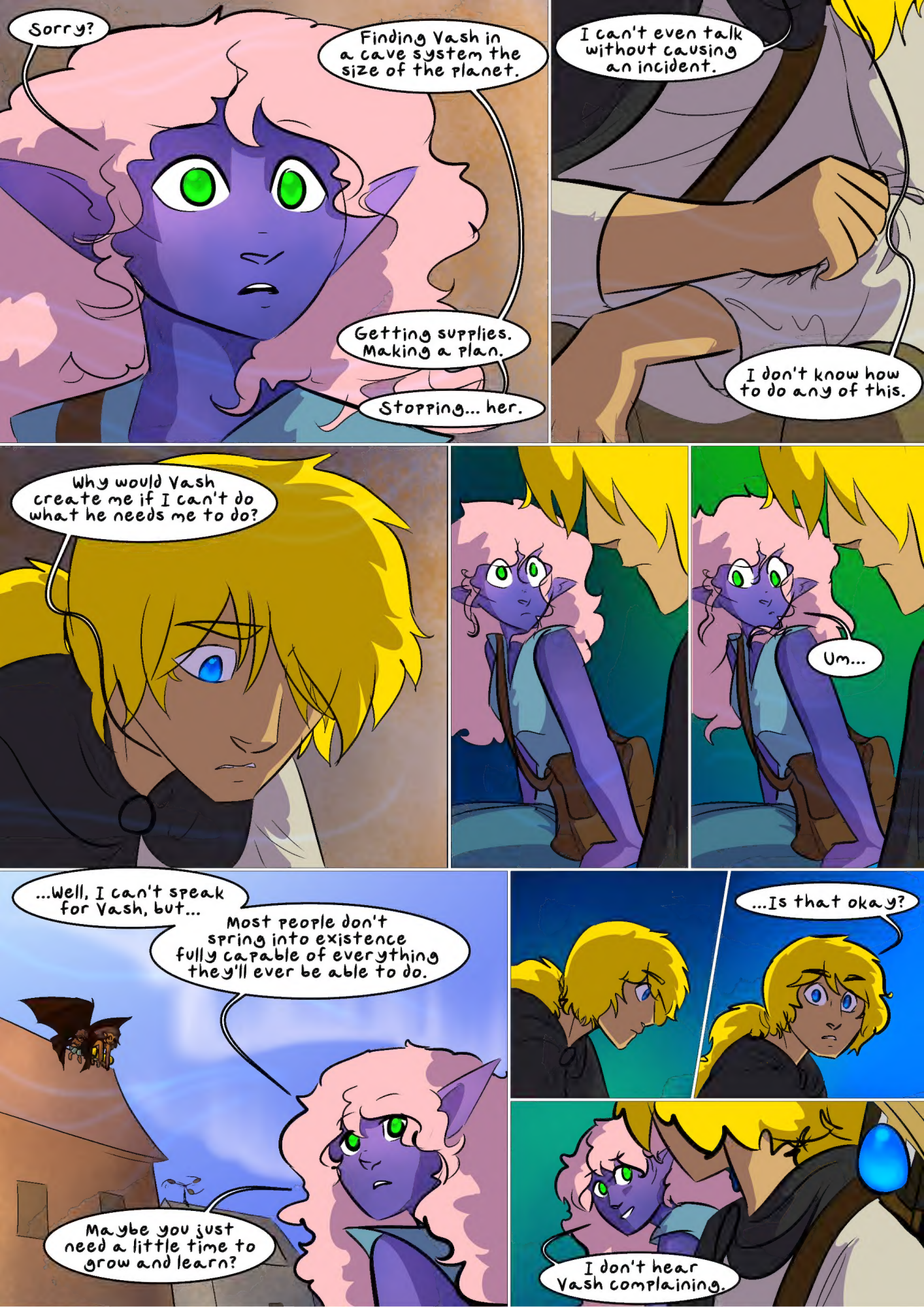
Yes, that is...
that is not the answer I expected to hear.
What you describe is at minimum unprecedented, and to my knowledge, theoretically impossible.
I was pretty confused too, but I've seen firsthand what he's capable of. He's not lying.
Why would I be lying?
Forgive me if I don't fully trust your corroboration.
Wha-?
The city was under siege by chimeras while an untrained life mage was living, alone and unsupervised, mere miles away?
A deeply unfortunate coincidence. One that isn't adding up.
Wait, you think-?
I had nothing to do with that!
I never went near the city, I barely knew what was happening until the city was destroyed!
And why is that?
Healers are in high demand. Well-respected, well-paid.
Why did you isolate yourself?
I - that's personal!
Did you, then, stand by as the city was destroyed?
NO! I couldn't-!
Excuse me.

HEY!
Kendal!
SHWING
Don't-!
I understand.
You didn't believe me.
So ask me something only Vash would know.
I'm... sorry?
Go ahead.
It's easier to hear him when I hold the sword.
If you don't trust me, maybe you'll trust him.
Could you... tell me...
what the weather was like the day Vash and Windcrest pledged mutual loyalty?

SHUNK
Cloudier than average. It rained briefly in the morning. Both moons were up.
Vash thought they looked beautiful rising over the storm's edge.
The record does not mention the moonrise, but...
the calendar date shows both moons crescent. The weather was correct.
Do you have any other questions?
...I suppose not.
POOF
I serve Vash. I vouch for Alinva.
Is that enough?
Given the demonstration, I believe that you are who... what you say you are.
...Yes.
Vash was a loyal ally.
I do not intend to disrespect his emissary.

I am... sorry for getting accusatory.
But surely my concern is understandable.
I am responsible for hundreds of lives.
If I had reason to suspect you posed a danger to them...
And, well. We all know what unscrupulous life mages are capable of.
...Huh.
I feel super healthy for some reason.
But I am reassured! We are honored to host an emissary of Vash.
You are both free to go about Windscrest as you please!
Hey.
Next time we talk to a government official -
I'll leave the sword.
Thanks.


...Well. That was unpleasant.
Wanna do some shopping?
...Vash didn't incarnate with any money.
I got it covered.
CHING
Wherever I settled, plants and animals started thriving.
People who spotted me thought I was a spirit.
After a while, I started getting offerings.
Bit embarrassing, but it had its perks!
It's not a LOT, but it should get us some food and a map.
wait, is this one currency?
Thank you.
CLINK
I don't know how I'm going to do this.


Sorry?
Finding Vash in a cave system the size of the planet.
Getting supplies. Making a plan.
Stopping... her.
I can't even talk without causing an incident.
I don't know how to do any of this.
Why would Vash create me if I can't do what he needs me to do?
Um...
...Well, I can't speak for Vash, but...
Most people don't spring into existence fully capable of everything they'll ever be able to do.
Maybe you just need a little time to grow and learn?
...Is that okay?
I don't hear Vash complaining.

Me neither.

What's up?
There's something...
The wind.
It's stopped.
But I thought you said the storm -
Oh.
...Okay.